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Look Inside the Indonesian  
Household*

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**Conceptualizing Poverty: A Look Inside the Indonesian Household**

**Victoria A. Beard**

## Abstract

As a result of the recent crisis in Indonesia, the question of how to conceptualize poverty is on the forefront of the nation's social and political agenda. Through an in-depth look inside the Indonesian household, this paper explores the continual tension in the poverty literature between the 'reductionists' who confine poverty to a limited set of variables, and the 'generalists' who believe that poverty is a broader, more complex phenomena. Through the analysis of an ethnographic case study based in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, this paper examines how local residents conceptualize poverty. Residents identified multiple facets of poverty, including: food insecurity, inadequate income and employment, single income households, inequality, inability to keep pace with modernization, and social exclusion. In addition, residents described poverty as 'a lack of everything'—*serba kekurangan*. This conceptualization provides insight into the interaction among the various facets of poverty that in turn make poverty a dynamic and intractable process. This finding is congruent with the 'generalist' view of poverty and is significant for policymakers as they formulate alleviation strategies.

## Introduction

In the wake of the crisis in Indonesia the need to identify poor households has never been more acute.<sup>1</sup> To this end, numerous large-scale surveys efforts have been launched (Biro Pusat Statistik 1999; International Labour Organization *et al.*, 1998; Suryahadi *et al.*, 1999; United Nations Support Facility for Indonesian Recovery, 1999). Central to understanding the findings of these surveys is the need to determine the inflation rate, how to calculate prices, and ultimately where to draw the line between the poor and non-poor. In the pandemonium to "get the figures right" it is easy to lose sight of the progress that has been made in terms of our understanding of poverty and it brings the unanswered question of how best to conceptualize poverty back to center-stage (Chambers, 1995; Ravallion, 1992; Sen, 1983; Sen, 1992; Townsend, 1985; Townsend, 1993; Ward, 1999; Wratten, 1995). Inherently a theoretical question, in the Indonesian context, this question translates directly into one of the nation's most critical social policy concerns: Which households are the rightful recipients of the nation's new social safety net program and other assistance targeted for the poor?

This paper addresses these questions through analysis of an ethnographic case study of an urban neighborhood in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The paper is based on in-depth interviews, oral histories, and field observation of 44 urban residents over a five year period. It demonstrates that residents conceptualized household-level poverty in terms of their life experiences. When discussing poverty, respondents made repeated reference to their class, education, gender, exposure to the media, place of birth, past and present economic status, and other life experiences that shaped their expectations. Patterns

regarding the diverse facets and the dynamic nature of poverty were discernible, although a universal definition of poverty did not emerge. This paper concludes with a conceptualization of poverty as an accumulation of interdependent facets that creates an intractable social and economic process.

### **Competing Conceptualizations of Poverty**

Dating back to the English Poor Law of 1507, the question of how to properly conceptualize poverty has been the subject of debate. These competing definitions of poverty are important because they affect our understanding of appropriate policy and alleviation strategies. The literature can be distilled into a single persistent tension between the reductionists who favor limiting poverty to the outcomes of a few key indicators, and the generalists who support a broader conceptualization.<sup>2</sup> This section outlines two separate yet related debates that exemplify this tension.

#### ***Example #1: Absolute versus Relative Poverty***

The tension between the reductionist and generalist view is evident in the early debates between Sen (1983) and Townsend (1985). Sen argues on behalf of a reductionist view of absolute poverty and Townsend argues for a more generalized view represented by relative poverty. Sen (1983: 153) in defense of absolute standards of poverty, argues that the debate between absolute and relative poverty is concerned with the question: "Should poverty be estimated with a cut-off line that reflects a level below which people are—in some sense—'absolutely' impoverished . . . ?" Sen argues that ultimately poverty must depend on an absolute notion of needs, although these needs are context dependent and

will change over time. Following this line of reasoning, needs are not fixed, they are open to interpretation. However, regardless of the specific needs, there is still an absolute point beyond which these needs are either fulfilled or unfulfilled. According to Sen, needs in this context are understood to include both physical and social needs. He argues "poverty is an absolute notion in the space of capabilities but very often it will take a relative form in the space of commodities or characteristics" (Sen, 1983: 161). Individuals have fixed capabilities and given different commodities they either fulfill their needs and live above or below the poverty cut-off (Sen, 1983).

Countering Sen's proposition, Townsend advocates a relative conceptualization of poverty. He contends capabilities are not absolute, but instead an individual's capabilities are ultimately dependent upon one's role in society, position in history, and the cultural context. Townsend supports this argument by stating that necessary caloric intake depends on an individual's work and the level of activity required by local custom. Townsend provides another example of the limitations of reducing poverty to absolute capabilities. He argues that an individual's capability to avoid disease largely depends on the medical technology and services available in a particular country or setting. Townsend's main point is that both needs and capabilities are social constructs and "have to be identified and measured in that spirit" (Townsend, 1985: 667). In addition, Townsend states that absolute poverty has mistakenly prioritized physiological needs over social needs, and relative poverty does not. In contrast, relative poverty gives ample consideration to an individual's ability to fulfill "social obligations, expectations and customs" (Townsend, 1993: 129).

### ***Example #2: Economic Deprivation versus Sustainable Livelihoods***

In this second example, economic deprivation represents the reductionist view of poverty and the generalist view is encapsulated in the notion of sustainable livelihoods. Economic deprivation is the most widely used conceptualization of poverty primarily because it is the easiest for policy-makers to operationalize. It is based on the idea that individuals need to consume a minimal level of goods to survive. Economic deprivation is conventionally measured with an absolute poverty line, which requires selecting a fixed level of consumption which remains constant, independent of an individual's life context (Ravallion, 1992). Absolute poverty lines are usually based on a calculation of minimal consumption needs and the bundle of goods necessary to fill those needs (Ravallion, 1992). These bundles include both food and essential non-food expenditures, such as shelter, health care, and clothing, and are usually different for rural and urban areas. Poverty, according to this argument is reduced to a calculus that links the designated bundle of goods and its price to an adjudication on poverty. Other widely used measures of this absolutist approach include minimum caloric in-take and the World Bank's one dollar day poverty line.

Rejecting the primacy of economic deprivation and the reductionist view of poverty it represents, Chambers (1995) critiques poverty defined as a lack of consumption. Chambers maintains that consumption and income have a role in the evaluation of poverty; however, it is only one dimension of poverty. Chambers views poverty in terms of multi-faceted deprivation. What is required therefore, is a notion of sustainable

livelihoods that overcomes the problems of the one-dimensional view of poverty based solely on income. This view itself has sometimes been erroneously reduced to a developed country focus on employment. Chambers contends this narrow conceptualization only represents one aspect of a combination of strategies the poor use to survive (Chambers, 1995). According to Chambers, the poor ultimately hold the most appropriate knowledge to articulate the various facets of deprivation.<sup>3</sup>

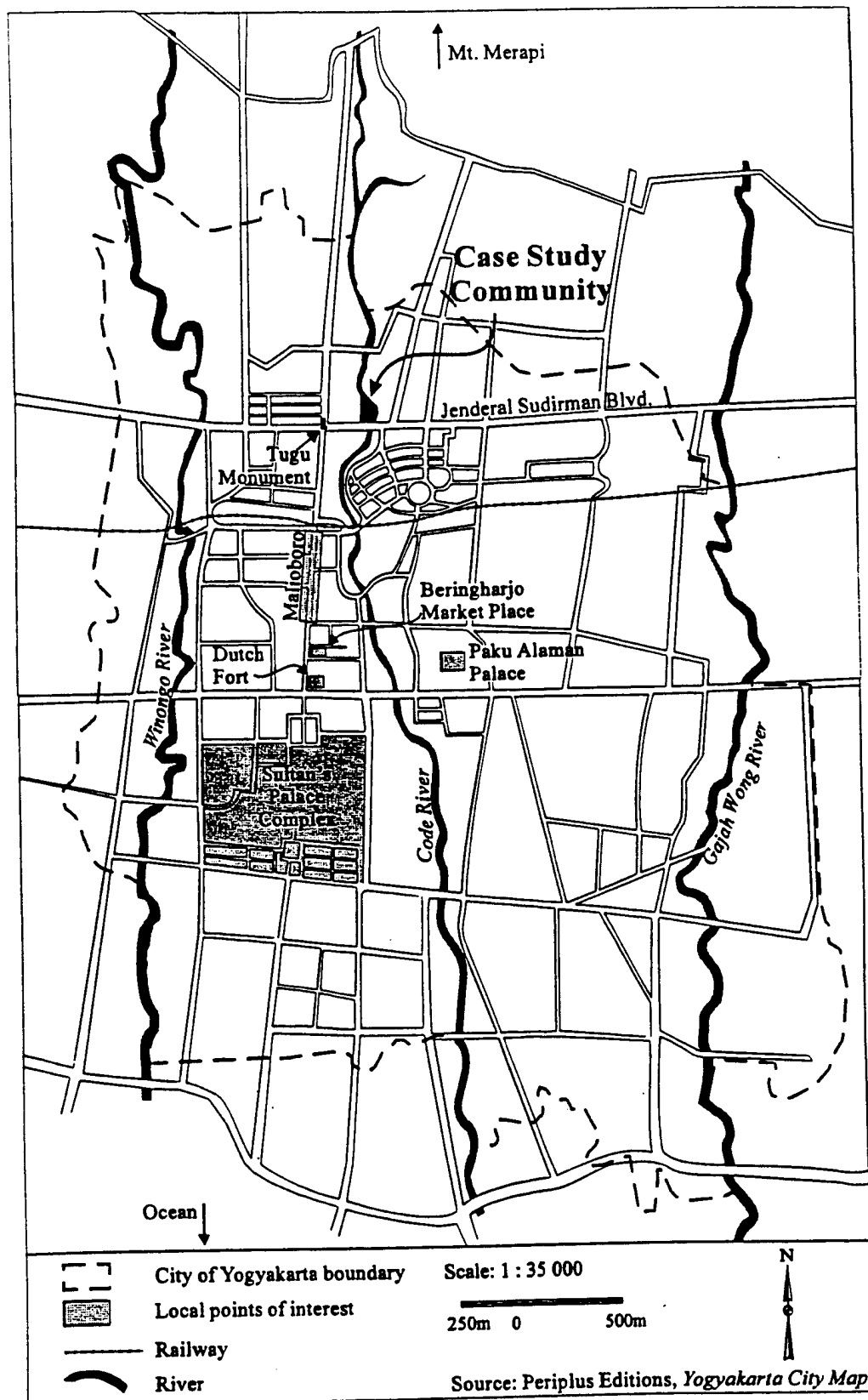
These two examples demonstrate the continual tension between the reductionists who want to confine poverty to a limited set of variables compared to the generalists who believe that poverty is a broader phenomena and requires an understanding of the circumstances surrounding a poor individual or household. Recently, in reaction to the reductionist's limited view of poverty, the generalist have moved away from this debate and have sought to define a series of separate poverty-related phenomena, such as multifaceted deprivation, vulnerability, and social exclusion (Chambers, 1995; de Haan, 1998). In the context of the crisis in Indonesia the question of how to conceptualization poverty has become increasingly politically charged because the conceptualization affects the total incidence of poverty which in turn affects decisions regarding the volume and allocation of foreign aid and decisions regarding effective strategies for alleviation, such as the removal of commodity based subsidies (United Nations Support Facility for Indonesian Recovery, 1999). In an attempt to test these conceptualization of poverty, the paper takes an in-depth look inside Indonesian households.



### **The Case Study: Gondolayu Lor**

This paper analyzes poverty vis-à-vis an ethnographic case study of a single urban community, Gondolayu Lor, in the city of Yogyakarta in Indonesia.<sup>4</sup> Gondolayu Lor is a residential community, or *kampung*, located along the west bank of the Code River. The communities located along the edge of this river were built largely outside of formal planning and regulatory frameworks, and their high density unregulated housing, combined with a lack of official land tenure status and frequent flooding, have shaped residents' lives and their perceptions of poverty.

Figure 1: Location of Gondolayu Lor in Yogyakarta



Despite residents' lack of physical and social security, there is a powerful sense of community in Gondolayu Lor. This sense of community is attributed to the many active community-based organizations; the relatively long average length of time residents have lived in the community (22 years); and, a sense of physical and socio-economic self-containment. Residents of the community were interviewed about their life histories, organization of their households, community interaction, and their perceptions of poverty.

### **Findings From Inside the Household: The Multiple Facets of Poverty**

The paper juxtaposes excerpts from interviews with individual respondents, their life stories, and a description of their household.<sup>5</sup> Each interview explains one facet of the conceptualization of poverty that emerges from the research. The interviews highlight a number of dimensions of poverty, namely food insecurity, inadequate income and employment, single income households, inequality, inability to keep pace with modernization, and social exclusion.

#### ***Food Insecurity and Absolute Poverty***

One of the clearest themes to emerge from the in-depth interviews was the parallel between poverty and not having enough food. Consistent with the literature, many respondents equated a lack of food with poverty (Sen, 1983). These respondents usually had lived through the political upheaval of 1965 and they describe it as a period of runaway inflation and widespread food shortages. For these respondents this dramatic historical period and their subsequent personal experiences served as a reference point from which to evaluate poverty. For many this was the period in their lives during which

they felt the most impoverished and, as a result, this unshakable experience became their definitive measure of poverty.

*Ibu* Bandi was born in 1940 in a village in Magelang, Central Java. When her father died, she moved to Yogyakarta to live with her uncle and to continue her education. She attended junior high for three years; however, she did not graduate and, after leaving school, she remained in Yogyakarta and enrolled in a typing course. When she was 18, *Ibu* Bandi returned to her village, where she applied for and received employment as a cashier in a pharmacy in Yogyakarta. She returned to Yogyakarta and rented a room until she met her husband, whom she married at the age of 22. At that time her husband was employed as a driver. After their marriage, they built a house in a Chinese cemetery located directly east of Gondolayu Lor, across the Code River. They occupied this house until 1970 when the government evicted the residents from the cemetery houses because these dwellings did not have building permits. Residents were given two months to find alternative housing. After unsuccessful efforts to find affordable shelter, *Ibu* Bandi and her husband resigned themselves to temporarily moving back to her village. In a last effort to avoid returning to the village, three days before the eviction, *Ibu* Bandi played the local numbers game and won. With this money she was able to purchase a small piece of land in Gondolayu Lor, and the residents from the cemetery community picked up her house and moved it across the river in one day. She has lived in the case study community ever since. Despite the length of time her family has lived in the community, they still do not have official government permission to occupy the land on which their house is built.<sup>6</sup> It is ironic that *Ibu* Bandi and her husband were able to remain in the city

thanks to a lucky gambling incident because *Ibu* Bandi, a Women's Family Welfare Organization activist, now preaches against the impoverishing effects of gambling.

*Ibu* Bandi has five children, four of whom live in her house. She lives with her two married children and their families, her two single adult children, and her husband. *Ibu* Bandi's two married children and their families purchase their own food and make the majority of their economic decisions independently. As a result, *Ibu* Bandi's household consists of herself, her husband, and their single son and daughter. *Ibu* Bandi's single son works as a cook in a large hotel and her single daughter is an attendant in a store. Her husband receives a monthly pension and she makes cloth flowers at home that are sold as traditional Javanese wedding accessories. The combined monthly household income of the four members of *Ibu* Bandi's household is 635,000 rupiah.<sup>7</sup> She estimates that her household's monthly expenditures are approximately 400,000 rupiah.<sup>8</sup>

*Ibu* Bandi's two married children and their individual households maintain separate cooking facilities, which enables each household to cook meals simultaneously and to keep their food separate. *Ibu* Bandi and her daughters each have their own independent savings in gold,<sup>9</sup> and each of the individual households has its own cash savings. However, these three distinct households share a number of physical assets, including: one television, one refrigerator, two radios, two bicycles, and the eggs from seven chickens. Despite the independent household economies, all three households benefit from the opportunity to share assets.

*Ibu* Bandi has been a community activist in Gondolayu Lor for 20 years and has acted as a leader in the Women's Family Welfare Organization, the Adult Literacy Program, and the Family Planning Acceptors' Support Group. She also helped found a local credit union.

Like many older residents in Gondolayu Lor, *Ibu* Bandi measures poverty in terms of food. For her, poverty is equated with an unreliable food supply:

In a *kampung* like this one, I think poverty first refers to not having a steady food supply. For example, now we can eat, but tomorrow we have to look for more food, then we have food, [and] tomorrow, up and down (*kembang kempislah*).<sup>10</sup>

*Ibu* Bandi describes what she considers a less important dimension of poverty, such as not having proper clothing and a healthy living environment, yet it is clear to her that a lack of a steady food supply is the primary indicator of poverty. According to *Ibu* Bandi, there is no poverty in Yogyakarta (as she has known it in her lifetime) because people are not hungry. She explains that true poverty does not exist in the case study community because at least once a week residents can afford to eat foods other than rice.

In this city there is none [true poverty]. Poverty has been replaced with a lack of welfare and level one welfare. Therefore, I think in this *kampung* poverty does not exist because in terms of food, even if it is only once a week or once every two weeks, we eat foods other than rice.

Although *Ibu* Bandi explains that the concept of poverty in urban areas has been replaced with an alternative concept of welfare, both concepts are based on access to food. In addition, the idea that poverty is now thought of as degrees of welfare is a direct reference to the national anti-poverty program, the Family Welfare Program — *Keluarga*

*Sejahtera*.<sup>11</sup> This program ranks households according to their different levels of welfare. As a Women's Family Welfare Organization activist, *Ibu* Bandi has received training on how to measure poverty according to the national anti-poverty program's criteria. This training in the standards and terminology established by this program, such as "level one welfare," have contributed to how *Ibu* Bandi conceptualizes poverty. In her opinion, all of these government-established levels of welfare are above poverty.

Like many older respondents, *Ibu* Bandi said that she experienced the most extreme poverty of her life during the political transition of the mid-1960s, when Indonesia experienced widespread food shortages. These respondents vividly remember both being forced to substitute rice with a grain referred to as *bulgur* and their confusion in attempting to cook this unfamiliar food. During the interviews, respondents described the rough texture of *bulgur* and referred to it as a food fit only for animals to consume. *Ibu* Bandi describes this period and her strategy for survival:

Indonesian people, all the civil servants, experienced difficult times because their salaries were not like they are now. I also experienced this before in '63. If you only wanted to eat rice you could not. . . . We ate *bulgur*, yes *bulgur*, because our ration of rice was only 6 kilos plus two kilos of *bulgur* or really hard corn. Because our salary was not enough I had to use my own initiative and I sold the rice so I could buy larger quantities of corn . . . after the years '65, '66, the level of prosperity of civil servants improved because salaries were raised.

Like many Gondolayu Lor residents old enough to remember the early to mid-1960s, *Ibu* Bandi uses memories of food shortages as a cogent reference point for gauging poverty. For these residents, poverty is not having enough food. Although poverty can be caused

by a combination of factors, such as an inadequate income, most older residents refer to not having enough food as an absolute point for determining if a person is poor.

### ***Sustainable Livelihoods and Inadequate Income and Employment***

Another strong pattern to emerge from the in-depth interviews was that respondents conceptualized poverty as a lack of employment opportunities and disposable income. In urban areas like Yogyakarta, a lack of food, employment opportunities, and a cash deficit are all fundamentally related. The absence of reliable livelihood relates closely to Chambers point regarding the vulnerability associated with deprivation (Chambers, 1995).

*Ibu Karni* is 27, and she was married at the age of 15. She and her husband both completed elementary school and are originally from the rural village of Boyolali, 90 kilometers northeast of Yogyakarta. *Ibu Karni's* husband moved to Yogyakarta first, while she remained in the village. Her first child was born in Boyolali before she followed her husband to Gondolayu Lor. At the time of the interview, she had lived in Gondolayu Lor for seven years with her husband, 10-year-old daughter, and seven-year-old son, and she was three months pregnant with a third child. Her husband earns 75,000 rupiah per month as a *becak* — pedicab — driver and she does not work outside the home.<sup>12</sup> She estimates that their monthly household expenses are 100,000 rupiah.<sup>13</sup> They rent a single room without running water or a toilet, but they own a television, radio, and bicycle. For water, *Ibu Karni* depends on her neighbor's well, and her family uses the river when they need a toilet. During the interview, a man came to her house for



payment, and she explained that she had bought her daughter shoes on credit and that the interest on her loan is collected daily.<sup>14</sup>

*Ibu Karni* illustrated how she conceptualized poverty with examples from her life. The first characteristic she used to describe poverty was the fact that her family rented its house while most of her neighbors owned theirs (although most of her neighbors' land tenure status is unclear). For *Ibu Karni*, poverty is clearly linked to a lack of disposable income related to her husband's employment as a low-paid pedicab driver. She describes this connection:

If you want to buy something and you do not have money, you will not make the purchase, right? But those who have [money] and want something, they can buy it. They want this and they can buy it.... Many people here are merchants, buying and selling tires. The have-nots are laborers [or] pedicab drivers; they cannot buy this or that. These are the poor.

According to *Ibu Karni*, the traders in the community are more affluent than the manual laborers, who are the "have-nots." For her, the indicators of poverty, like rental housing, lack of cash, and low-paid employment, are all interdependent, and this interdependency is intensified in urban areas. Despite this, *Ibu Karni* prefers to live with her husband in the city because it eliminates the need to spend money on transportation to visit her in the village. Regardless of this benefit, she acknowledges that living in the city requires more money than living in the village:

It is expensive here. In the village, shopping with 2,000 rupiah is enough.<sup>15</sup> Here [in the city] children are always buying snacks, shopping, everything is purchased. It is not like that in the village. We have our own rice in the village. Here we have to buy everything.

As *Ibu Karni* acknowledges in urban areas it is impossible to overlook the interdependent relationship between employment and the cash needed to purchase daily necessities, such as food.

### ***The Vulnerability of Single-Income Households***

It is not uncommon for the residents of Gondolayu Lor to equate single-income households with poverty, particularly single-income households with children. In Gondolayu Lor, these households are often headed by women, usually widows. Many respondents referred to the need for both the husband and wife to work in order to reduce urban poverty. Frequently, respondents referred to single women with dependent children as examples of the poorest households in the community because these households have no internal safety net. This point speaks directly to the debate in the literature regarding whether or not female-headed households are the 'poorest of the poor' (Chant, 1999; Tinker, 1990). Regardless of gender, respondents believed households that had more than one working adult were in a stronger economic position because they had an opportunity to combine resources as a strategy for survival. The following is a description of a household headed by a single woman; interview respondents regularly referred to this household as the poorest in the community.

*Ibu Marsono* lives with her adult daughter, 10-year-old granddaughter, and eight-year-old grandson. *Ibu Marsono* rarely sees her son; he is married and lives in another community in Yogyakarta. Her daughter attended junior high school for two years, and her son completed junior high school. Although both *Ibu Marsono* and her daughter work, they

do not combine their resources, and *Ibu* Marsono is the primary provider for her daughter's two young children, her grandchildren.

*Ibu* Marsono has been a widow for four years and is one of the poorest residents in the *kampung*. Born in the rural village of Wonosari, *Ibu* Marsono moved to Yogyakarta with her aunt when she was too young to remember having done so, and she has never attended school. As a child, she helped her aunt serve customers in a *warung* — small food stall — and when she was older, she worked as a domestic servant in a dentist's house in Yogyakarta. It was here she met her husband. He was working as a servant for the police station, and when he would travel to and from work each day, he would see *Ibu* Marsono gardening in the front yard. They married when she was 27.

After *Ibu* Marsono married, she left her job as a domestic servant, and the couple moved to Gondolayu Lor. In one day they built their wood and bamboo house on a parcel of land that borders the Code River. *Ibu* Marsono worked as an assistant selling *bakso* — a meatball soup sold from a pushcart. Her husband owned his own pushcart and sold *rujak* — a fruit dish. She believed her husband was healthy prior to his death. He died suddenly one afternoon, while praying. *Ibu* Marsono says he simply collapsed, was carried home by neighbors, and died a few hours later.

There are a number of reasons why local residents consider *Ibu* Marsono to be one of the poorest members of the community. One of the primary reasons is that her house is a small, dark, semi-permanent structure located directly on the edge of the Code River. It

is one of the few houses in the community that is neither directly accessible nor visible from a public footpath and can be reached only by walking through the courtyard of another house. This courtyard is primarily used for washing clothes and dishes, and it is partially occupied by an outhouse. As a result, *Ibu* Marsono's house is spatially isolated from the community in both a physical and a social sense.

*Ibu* Marsono only earns 30,000 rupiah a month, as a domestic servant for another household in the community.<sup>16</sup> This is an almost unbelievably low income with which to support herself and her two grandchildren. If *Ibu* Marsono were to combine her household income with her daughter's salary, it would total 130,000 rupiah a month.<sup>17</sup> While she owns her home, *Ibu* Marsono does not own the land it occupies. Unlike most households in Gondolayu Lor, she owns few material assets, possessing no television, bicycle, refrigerator, or gold. However, she does contribute 2,500 rupiah per month to *arisan* — a local rotating credit scheme.<sup>18</sup>

Even though her daughter works in a retail store, she provides neither money nor food to help feed her children. *Ibu* Marsono describes the difficulty she has feeding her two grandchildren:

If there is not enough, then there is not enough, if there is none, then there is none, if we use it, then there is not enough; if we do not use it, then there is [enough]. The bottom line is we only have what we have. We have to make it enough, the point is to eat. . . . One package of noodles is eaten by three people. . . . "*Bu*, buy something!" my grandchildren call me "*Ibu*," and they call their mother "mamak". . . . They call to me "*Bu*, buy noodles!" [I answer] "Okay buy the noodles over there and split them with me." "Yes." [they answer] They boil them

alone. The girl already knows how to boil the noodles, then we split them three ways and we have eaten.

The noodles *Ibu* Marsono is referring to are usually considered enough for one meal for one person. *Ibu* Marsono's family has periodically received various forms of welfare from the state and local church. Two years ago, *Ibu* Marsono was nominated by the local Women's Family Welfare Organization to receive assistance from the local government in order to replace the dirt floor in her home with a cement floor. The local subdistrict office provided most of the cement — five bags. She purchased one additional bag of cement, and the community volunteered its labor to pave her floor. *Ibu* Marsono, a Christian, also described how every year around Christmas she receives food and clothing from a local church. She describes poverty as a condition in which a person will accept whatever assistance he or she is offered and feel thankful for it.

Like many of the lowest income respondents, *Ibu* Marsono refused to talk about poverty in abstract terms, instead explaining it by describing the conditions of her daily life. She is considered one of the poorest members of the community for numerous reasons; the main one being that she is the sole provider for her two grandchildren. Clearly, *Ibu* Marsono's situation would be improved if she could pool her resources with another income earner in order to help support her two young grandchildren.

### ***Inequality***

Both the interview respondents and the poverty literature discuss the connection between poverty and economic inequality (Ravallion, 1992; Sen, 1992). In developing countries,

where a large percentage of the poor population does not have access to an adequate food supply, economic inequality is not usually used as a measure of poverty; however, in developed countries, where most people have adequate food supplies and their basic needs are satisfied, economic inequality becomes a significant component in measuring poverty. A similar pattern was apparent in the interviews. Respondents first referred to a lack of food as the most important determinant of poverty; however, when this need was satisfied, they became increasingly concerned with how their standard of living compared with that of their neighbors.

*Ibu* Nurdalina is 38 and has three sons. Her oldest son is 18 and lives with his grandparents because, as she explains, when he was born, she was too poor to take care of him. She lives with her husband and their other two sons, who are 12 and 10, in Gondolayu Lor. *Ibu* Nurdalina was born in the city of Yogyakarta, and she met her husband in high school. After their marriage, her husband immediately moved to Jakarta to work and *Ibu* Nurdalina remained in Yogyakarta. When her husband got a job in Bogor, she moved and worked briefly in a photocopy store. She subsequently moved with her husband to Jakarta and Cilacap before returning to Yogyakarta. After *Ibu* Nurdalina returned to Yogyakarta, her husband moved to Semarang to find work. Presently, her husband is a construction worker in Yogyakarta and *Ibu* Nurdalina does not work outside the home. She estimates that her husband earns approximately 200,000 rupiah a month and that the household monthly expenses are approximately 240,000 rupiah a month.<sup>19</sup> They own their house, but they do not own the land it occupies.

First and foremost, *Ibu* Nurdlina defines poverty as not having enough food. Then she further explains how poverty relates to having less than her neighbors:

Well maybe I want something that is the same as my neighbors. I want to buy something, so I will have the same standard as my neighbors. Maybe I cannot yet have this or that, or I cannot have the same things [as my neighbors].

*Ibu* Nurdlina represents many in-depth interview respondents when she relates poverty to economic inequality, or having less than one's neighbors (although this was not usually the first definition provided). *Ibu* Nurdlina felt that her poverty level depended on how her disposable income, material possessions, home ownership, and other physical measures of wealth compared with those of neighbors. It is interesting that *Ibu* Nurdlina, similar to other respondents, compared her household to her neighbors, rather than the broader inequalities in either Yogyakarta or Indonesia. There was a sense among respondents that one should have similar levels of wealth to one's neighbors or other community members and obvious inequalities within the community were disturbing. This pattern of relating poverty to economic inequality normally emerged in interviews with respondents whose access to food was sufficient and whose other basic needs were fulfilled.

### ***The Inability to Keep Pace with Modernization and Relative Poverty***

Poverty as a measure of modernization was another theme that emerged from the in-depth interviews, and relates well to Townsend's concept of relative poverty (Townsend, 1985; Townsend, 1993). Many respondents associated poverty with underdevelopment and backwardness. Some respondents associated poverty with practices like bathing, washing clothes, and drinking water from the river. The national government reinforces this

dichotomy between backwardness and modernization through the Women's Family Welfare Organization, among other mechanisms, which teaches "modern" behavior to low-income women as part of its poverty alleviation program. The National Family Planning Program also reinforces this association between "modern" behavior and a lack of poverty through advocating such indicators of human welfare as: practicing a state recognized religion on a regular basis, wearing different clothes at home and in public, and using excess income for recreational purposes. These are not the main focuses of these programs, which contribute significantly to Indonesia's poverty alleviation effort; however, they also define what is characteristic of developed (non-poor) as opposed to underdeveloped (poor) behavior. Most respondents' standard of living has improved over their lifetimes and they associate this improvement with Indonesia's national development programs and modernization. As a result, some respondents associate poverty with an inability to keep pace with these changes.

*Pak Mustarimasno* is 55. Originally from the village of Kebumen, located 107 kilometers west of Yogyakarta, he moved to Yogyakarta when he was eight and to Gondolayu Lor when he was 26. *Pak Mustarimasno* attended, although he did not complete, junior high school. *Pak Mustarimasno* has retired from his formal employment at a hospital in Yogyakarta, and now he periodically works as an informal carpenter in the community. Over the years his duties at the hospital alternated between those of a janitor, a telephone operator, a technician, and a mechanic, depending on the needs of the hospital and the availability of other employees. His wife continues to work at the hospital, managing her own *warung* — food stall. When he was working at the hospital *Pak Mustarimasno's*



salary was 285,000 rupiah per month, and his wife earned 300,000 rupiah per month.<sup>20</sup>

*Pak Mustarimasno* In terms of assets, his household has one television worth 200,000 rupiah; cash savings of 50,000 rupiah; savings in gold worth 787,000 rupiah; and another plot of land and house worth 25,000,000 rupiah.<sup>21</sup> He owns the house his family occupies, but they do not have official permission to occupy the land.

*Pak Mustarimasno* lives with his wife and two adult daughters, 20 and 25 years of age, respectively. His youngest daughter completed three semesters at a private university and decided not to continue. His oldest daughter is a university graduate and is unemployed. In Gondolayu Lor, *Pak Mustarimasno* is a community activist whose area of specialization is construction. He is also active in the lower RTs' local credit union. During the in-depth interview, he stated that he felt poor. He discussed how he had to borrow large sums of money to pay his daughters' university tuition and how these debts worry him.

According to *Pak Mustarimasno*, the concept of poverty has changed over time, he equates poverty with the inability to keep pace with modernization. Like other respondents, he describes how between 1945 and 1970 poverty meant not having enough food but now is means keeping pace with an improved living standard:

According to me, poverty is different now than poverty before, I mean before 1970, and after Indonesian independence [1945]. Before, to eat each day for a poor person was difficult. . . . Now I see that poor people can eat, but they cannot keep up with development.

He goes on to describe owning a television as an indicator that a household is keeping pace with the development process. *Pak Mustarimasno* believes a poor person can also be identified by their work, level of income, and living conditions. According to *Pak Mustarimasno*, the meaning of poverty will continue to change as Indonesia develops and material expectations continue to increase.

### ***Social Exclusion***

Social exclusion or the inability to participate in established customs or activities is a well documented characteristic of poverty (Gaventa, 1999; de Haan, 1999; Strobel, 1996; Townsend, 1993). Many respondents stated that the inability to participate in local social obligations is a manifestation of poverty, yet this indicator was usually mentioned after a lack of access to food and an inability to fulfill other basic needs. Common social activities (or customs) usually included: the ability to purchase a wedding present or give money in an envelope to a family that had experienced a tragedy (approximately 5,000 rupiah), to make a contribution to the Independence Day festivities or a community improvement project (1,000 rupiah), to participate in meetings of local community organizations that require monthly dues (between 100 and 250 rupiah), and to participate in the local credit programs.<sup>22</sup> Social exclusion, although more abstract and difficult for respondents to articulate, is a significant manifestation of poverty because it eludes to the fact that poverty is not a static accumulation of indicators, rather it is an intractable processes. For example, the exclusion of a poor household from interacting with the community will further inhibit that household from learning about opportunities to improve its situation.

*Ibu* Sri Yuniarti grew up in Gondolayu Lor, and she has been active in community activities since she was young girl. As a teenager, she was active in the Gondolayu Lor Youth Group, which organized local outings. Her husband also grew up in Gondolayu Lor, and they met through mutual participation in the Youth Group. She graduated from high school, and her husband completed junior high school. *Ibu* Sri Yuniarti married when she was 21. After her husband finished junior high school, he worked as a minibus driver's assistant. This job required spotting potential passengers, helping them load their possessions on the bus, and collecting their fares. After this job, he sold bread and then worked as a server for large wedding parties. *Ibu* Sri Yuniarti is proud that her husband now works for a large hotel because usually hotel employees must have a high school diploma. The first time her husband worked for the hotel he was hired as a substitute driver because the regular driver was absent and a neighbor who worked as a security guard for the hotel recommended him. His first shift was from 4:00 a.m. to 12:00 midnight, after which he was offered a permanent position. Before she had children, *Ibu* Sri Yuniarti worked in a batik textile factory; however, since the birth of her first child, she has not worked outside the home.

*Ibu* Sri Yuniarti is 34 and her husband is 37. She has two children, one 13 and the other 11. Like her mother, *Ibu* Sri Yuniarti makes small cloth flowers and weaves women's purses at home in order to supplement her husband's income. Each month she earns approximately 82,000 rupiah, and her husband's salary is 100,000 rupiah as well as another 100,000 rupiah in tips and bonuses.<sup>23</sup> She estimates that her household's monthly

income is approximately 300,000 rupiah.<sup>24</sup> Like her mother, she is a community development activist. She plans and implements the Women's Family Welfare Organization programs, such as the Mother and Child Health Care Clinic (*posyandu*), and Health Care Clinic for the Elderly (*poslansia*).

When asked about how she conceptualizes poverty, she first replied that a family of four earning less than 50,000 rupiah per month is poor, and she linked this figure to the cost of food, specifically rice:

In my opinion, a poor family, for example, has less than 50,000 rupiah per month to meet their needs. That is a poor family because here a family of four needs at least that much to purchase a half kilogram of rice [per day]. The cost [of a half kilogram of rice] is 500 rupiah. To cook [for a family] costs at least 1,500 rupiah, and this does not include a variety of food. It could cost as much as 2,000 rupiah. Two thousand rupiah [per day] equals 60,000 rupiah per month. Therefore, below 50,000 rupiah is a poor family.<sup>25</sup>

This calculation is primarily based on a minimum amount of food. When she was asked to describe a poor household in further detail, she referred to its inability to participate in normal social functions. She describes how participation in social functions is an impossibility for families that cannot afford food:

For example, if that family [a poor family] has a celebration (*hajatan*) to attend, they will want to contribute, but if they feel that it is too much of a burden, they will think "even for ourselves sometimes we do not have enough, barely enough." A daily income of 2,000 rupiah characterizes a poor family.<sup>26</sup>

Cumulatively, the responses from the interviews reveal the respondents' perception that the diverse facets of poverty are interrelated. In urban areas, not having food is a manifestation of not having money to buy it, and if a household does not have money to buy food, then they are unable to spend money on social obligations. This social

exclusion compounds the problems of the poor, isolating families from social contacts who might be able to assist them. For example, *Ibu* Sri Yuniarti's husband was able to learn about his job through a friend. The social exclusion described here also exemplifies how poverty is an intractable process with limited opportunities to break free.

### ***The Intractable Process of Poverty***

Many respondents described poverty as *serba kekurangan* — a lack of everything. At first this response was frustrating because it appeared to offer little insight into how respondents understood poverty. During further discussions, it became one of the most enlightening responses. "A lack of everything" describes the intractable process of poverty. This response articulates what other respondents expressed in their interviews; it is unlikely that one characteristic of poverty occurs in isolation; rarely does a household have proper shelter but not enough food, or the ability to contribute money to a celebration but not a sufficient disposable income. There were cases where a household had adequate food and clothing but not proper shelter, but these were exceptions. Those households deemed poor by the community or those households that were nominated for public welfare assistance were considered poor for an accumulation of reasons, and it was the dynamics created by this accumulation that makes poverty an intractable process.

*Ibu* Siswoatmodjo is a 69-year-old widow originally from Magelang in Central Java; however, she has lived in Gondolayu Lor for 45 years. The man she married was a relative whom she had known since her childhood in Magelang. After marrying, they had three children. Her husband was in the army first in Magelang and then was assigned to

Yogyakarta. At this time, the entire family moved into a rented room south of Gondolayu Lor (*Gondolayu Kidul*). In 1952, a masseuse told *Ibu* Siswoatmodjo about a house for sale in Gondolayu Lor. She and her husband decided that it was better to buy a house than to continue to spend the family's income for rent. At that time the house cost 3,500 rupiah, and, in order to pay for it, *Ibu* Siswoatmodjo sold her gold jewelry and rice fields in the village.<sup>27</sup> However, this money was not enough to cover the entire cost of the house, which took a few years to pay off, and *Ibu* Siswoatmodjo still does not own the land it occupies. After moving to Gondolayu Lor, she had five more children. Her husband completed his military service and worked as a barber until he retired. *Ibu* Siswoatmodjo worked as a trader in the market until this work became too tiring, and then she worked as a seamstress at home. Presently, she does not have her own income and lives from her husband's 82,000 rupiah army pension.<sup>28</sup>

*Ibu* Siswoatmodjo's husband died in 1989, shortly after receiving his pension from the military. She lives with her widowed daughter who is 43, a granddaughter who is 18, and a grandson who is 12. The daughter with whom *Ibu* Siswoatmodjo lives earns 30,000 rupiah per month selling clothes in the market. The household does not own a television, radio, or refrigerator, but it does own two bicycles, and *Ibu* Siswoatmodjo has five grams of savings in gold worth 120,000 rupiah.<sup>29</sup> She is a community activist and organizes assistance for poor families through the local mosque. Sometimes this assistance takes the form of food, and other times it takes the form of money for medical or school expenses.

When asked to describe what poverty means to her, she immediately responded: "Being poor, that is not having enough of everything." When asked to further clarify "everything," she replied:

Well everything, for example not having enough food to fill oneself on a daily basis, not having proper clothing. That is what I call not having enough. . . . If a person does not have enough [and they] want to socialize they are embarrassed they have no self-esteem. . . . Poverty means all sorts of shortages. . . . Also their thoughts are not happy, that is what I mean by a "poor person." Whatever they want is not fulfilled.

*Ibu* Siswoatmodjo, like many respondents, emphasizes the inter-relatedness and intractability of different aspects of poverty. Her statements also shows how poverty makes people ashamed to interact with their neighbors and marginalizes them from the community. She describes how a lack of food and proper clothing can cause a person's self-esteem and mental health to deteriorate. According to *Ibu* Siswoatmodjo, the physical and psychological manifestations of poverty are interdependent. This broader view of poverty captures the complexity of poverty as multi-faceted deprivation where each of the various facets are inter-related and it is the dynamic, mutually-reinforcing nature of the *interaction* between these multiple facets that makes poverty an intractable process. This depiction of poverty makes it impossible to reduce poverty to a single or set of numeric indicators.

### Conclusion

Most residents of Gondolayu Lor could not separate themselves from their understanding of poverty. When asked to describe what poverty was or how they would characterize a

poor household, respondents always returned to their personal life experiences. The paper juxtaposes a description of the respondent with their description of poverty. Just as the respondents did not feel they could discuss poverty in abstract terms, their responses did not make sense outside the context in which they were conceived.

A single, universal definition of poverty is not derived from the interviews; however, specific patterns were discernable. In many cases, a respondent would refer to a number of themes in a single interview. For example, almost all respondents viewed a lack of food as an indicator of absolute poverty. However, in the urban environment, under normal political and economic conditions, this problem is associated with lack of income and unemployment, and the vulnerability it creates. Single-income households are also vulnerable because they do not have an internal safety net. For households with adequate food, poverty is often understood by way of comparison with more affluent members of the community. For example, houses constructed from bamboo mats, having dirt floors, and being without toilets, television, radios, or other material assets, are usually considered poor. More importantly, these assets represents a margin between well-being and dissolution. This discernible material gap between the poorest and more affluent households prevents the former from participating in important social interactions thus creating a condition of social exclusion. Poor individuals avoid participation not only because they cannot afford to contribute their time or money, but because their poverty is humiliating and depressing. In turn, social exclusion is a further barrier to partaking in opportunities, however minor or ephemeral, that might redress poverty.



In the end, not having enough of everything — *serba kekurangan* — is the most powerful insight into poverty because it evokes an understanding of poverty as a multifaceted, dynamic, and intractable process. This broader, richer, and more complex understanding of poverty is congruent with the generalist perspective presented earlier. This conceptualization of poverty encompasses aspects of absolute poverty, relative poverty, vulnerability, and social exclusion; however, it does not consider these separate phenomena. Instead, these are all interdependent facets that interact with each other and create a dynamic process as opposed to the crude numeric calculus represented by the reductionist view. This conceptualization of poverty is particularly critical in the context of the current crisis and the resulting increase in the total incidence of poverty. It is important that the complex nature of poverty remain in the forefront of policymakers' minds as they formulate strategies for its alleviation.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> The paper refers to the Asian monetary or financial crisis as "the crisis" because in Indonesia it has impacted political, social, cultural, as well as, economic spheres.

<sup>2</sup> A exhaustive review of the competing conceptualizations of poverty is well beyond the scope of this paper. For a comprehensive review of the competing conceptualizations from both the Western and Indonesian literature see Beard 1998.

<sup>3</sup> For an additional example of the generalist view of poverty, see Friedmann (1992, 1996) who analyzes poverty in terms of the production of livelihood and access to bases of social power.

<sup>4</sup> The data analyzed in the paper is based on in-depth interviews and oral histories conducted with 44 residents over 22 months of field observation in Gondolayu Lor. Respondents were interviewed multiple times over a five year period between 1994 and 1999. The sample of interview respondents was purposive in that it sought to target a diversity of residents within the case study community. Diversity was defined in terms of age, gender, residential tenure, income, employment, housing, education, and the level of participation in community-based organizations.

<sup>5</sup> This paper presents data from a sub-sample of interviews selected because they expressed an understanding of poverty that was also held by other respondents. The decision to limit the number of responses presented here was based on the desire to couple these responses with a description of the respondent's life history and household in order that the reader can contextualize the respondents' perception of poverty.

<sup>6</sup> It is not uncommon for residents to purchase either a house or land from a previous occupant and not to have official government-recognized land tenure status. This is usually because the previous occupant did not have official land tenure status.

<sup>7</sup> Utilizing the exchange rate at the time of the fieldwork (2,300 rupiah equals \$1 U.S.), 635,000 rupiah is approximately equivalent to \$276 U.S. per month.

<sup>8</sup> This is approximately equivalent to \$174 U.S. per month.

<sup>9</sup> Gold, usually saved in the form of jewelry, is an important asset for Javanese women. Many Javanese women prefer to save money in the form of gold because, either worn or hidden, it is considered a safer investment than cash. Many women state that they feel a sense of ownership over their gold, as opposed to cash, because they decide when it is appropriate to sell it.

<sup>10</sup> For an Indonesian translation of all the quotes in this paper see Beard 1998.

<sup>11</sup> This program should not be confused with the national Women's Family Welfare Organization. The Family Welfare Program, sometimes referred to as KS, is a new national program for measuring and alleviating household poverty.

<sup>12</sup> This is approximately equivalent to \$33 U.S. per month.

<sup>13</sup> This is approximately equivalent to \$43 U.S. per month.

<sup>14</sup> These private creditors are referred to as *rentenir*. Community managed micro-credit programs seek to put these creditors out of business because it is believed their daily interest rates further impoverishes poor residents.

<sup>15</sup> This is approximately equivalent to \$0.87 U.S.

<sup>16</sup> This is approximately equivalent to \$13 U.S. per month.

<sup>17</sup> This is approximately equivalent to \$57 U.S. per month.

<sup>18</sup> This is approximately equivalent to \$1.09 U.S.

<sup>19</sup> This is approximately equivalent to \$87 U.S. per month in earnings and \$104 U.S. per month in expenditures.

<sup>20</sup> His salary is approximately equivalent to \$124 U.S. per month and his wife's salary is approximately equivalent to \$130 U.S. per month

<sup>21</sup> The worth of his assets are one television is equivalent to \$87 U.S., cash savings \$57 U.S., savings in gold \$342 U.S., and a house \$10,867 U.S..

<sup>22</sup> Based on the exchange rate at the time of the field research, 5,000 rupiah equals \$2.17 U.S., 1,000 rupiah equals \$.43 U.S., and 100 to 250 rupiah equals between \$.04 and \$.11 U.S.

<sup>23</sup> Her income is worth \$36 U.S., her husband's income is worth \$43 U.S. 43, and his tips and bonuses are worth \$43 U.S.

<sup>24</sup> She estimates her monthly household income is approximately \$130 U.S.

<sup>25</sup> According to Ibu Sri Yuniarti a family of four earning less than \$22 U.S. a month is poor because the cost of a half kilogram of rice is \$0.22 U.S., the cost of cooking ranges between \$0.65 U.S. and \$0.87 U.S., and if a family spends \$0.87 U.S. per day this more than \$26 U.S. a month.

<sup>26</sup> This is approximately \$0.87 U.S.

<sup>27</sup> This is approximately \$1.52 U.S.

<sup>28</sup> This is approximately \$13 U.S.

<sup>29</sup> This is approximately \$52 U.S.

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